



*Observations on the Stone Coffins found at Christ-Church. By Mr. Pegge. In a Letter to Gustavus Brander, Esq.*

Read at the Society of ANTIQUARIES, Nov. 13, 1777.

DEAR SIR,

I CANNOT deny myself the pleasure of presenting you with some cursory observations on three very singular stone coffins lately discovered at your seat of *Christ-church Twynham*, of which you was so obliging as to send me a sketch.

THE



THE stone coffin is of very remote antiquity in this island, for the *kjst vaen* of the *Britons* ought, as I apprehend, to be referred to it. Some of these rude sepulchral receptacles I have seen myself in Derbyshire, and others may be found described in Camden[a].

YOUR coffins, which are somewhat more artificial, appear to be a degree of improvement on the former; and there is a circumstance or two attending them, which make them highly worthy of notice. They are composed not of one block, formed by excavation, as the stone coffins often, and very anciently, were[b], but of various, not fewer than ten or eleven pieces; and there does not appear to have been any stone underneath for the body interred to lie upon.

As to the first particular, it may be doubted whether the parties concerned could find any stones proper for the service in the neighbourhood of Christ-church, so they had recourse to Normandy for them (for the stones are apparently French from about Caen), where they either could not obtain a single stone of a competent size, or, as I rather think, were not then possessed of the idea of making use of such an one, and so transported a number of smaller ones. And this I esteem an argument of the antiquity of your coffin, since, in later ages, the stone coffins have always been found composed of one piece, with a lid or cover. Again, I know not whether this might not have been in imitation of the Romans, for though this people at last applied the single stone, as we shall see hereafter, yet Mr. Thoresby tells us, "There was digged up at the same place [a Roman burying ground at York] a sort of coffin made of clay; I have by me part of the bottom, which

[a] Camden, col. 707. 740. 751. 753. 773.

[b] See below.

"(for

" (for the convenience of baking I presume) *was divided into several such parts*; this is entire as first moulded by the Romans, is 14½ inches long, and almost 11 broad at the narrower end, and nigh 12½ at the broader, &c." [c] He adds, that there were in his Museum "fragments also of such a coffin found at *Burgdurum*." All which seems to shew, that at first the stone coffins, both among the Britons and Romans, consisted of a number of parts, and that the cutting them out of a single block was a later improvement; yours consequently is of the more antique kind.

THE next and last improvement in the stone coffin, was by forming them of a single stone with the mallet and tool; and this I ascribe to the Romans; for I apprehend, that during the general prevalency of the customs of cremation and urn-burial among the Romans, they had not always recourse to the funeral pile, but that bodies were sometimes interred whole, and in their natural state. I have the suffrages of Kirchman [d], Ainsworth [e], and Drake [f]; and this is agreeable also to appearances here. Mr. Thomas Beckwith of York, who is now a member of the Society, informs me, that hearing of two stone coffins, discovered anno 1776, in the new inclosures at *Acomb* near York, he had the curiosity to go and view them, and saw them lying in the very place where they were found. He thinks they are Roman; and the observations on which he grounds his opinion are so just and forcible, that I cannot but subscribe to it; and shall give them here abbreviately.

"THE coffins were of the coarse grit, the same as that at Plumpton near Knareborough, which the Romans appear to

[c] Thoresby, Mus. p. 561.

[d] P. 342.

[e] Monum. Kemp. p. 170.

[f] Eborac. p. 63.

to

have been fond of, as many of their works in York are of that stone. The coffins were 2½ inches thick on the sides, and the lids (which had a fillet raised about ½ of an inch running down the middle) something thicker.

"THEY lay, one for a youth of 12 or 14 years of age, with the feet pointing nearly South; and the other, for a grown person, to the South-West; directions and positions so unusual in Christian burial, that one must conclude the coffins belonged to Pagans, and were more ancient than the conversion of the Romans and Britons in these parts.

"THERE is no account of any church, or religious house, either at, or near, this place; no foundations of any buildings found in plowing. It is about a mile N. W. from *Acomb*, where it is said the body of the Emperor Severus was burnt: and when the lids were on the coffins, they could not be more than one quarter of a yard beneath the surface of the earth." The man who found the coffins told Mr. Beckwith, that on their being first opened, there appeared something like an human body; but as soon as touched it lost its form, falling down and mixing with the water at the bottom of the coffins.

THESE reasons, Sir, all taken together, may seem sufficient to enforce a belief, that these bodies were interred during the Pagan state of things here. "*Quæ cum ita sint,*" says Mr. Ainsworth, "*non compertum videtur omnes illæ arcas, quæ multis locis effossæ apud nos fuerunt, esse Anglo-Saxonum, ut vulgo perhibentur. Sunt enim, quas etsi populi istius esse non abnegaverim, Romanis tamen abjudicare non ausim.*" He concludes, "*Hæc obiter dicenda judicavimus, ne quis creationem unicam et perpetuam sepulturæ fuisse consuetudinem apud Romanos putaret [g].*"

[g] Monum. Kemp. p. 171.

I COME,

I COME, now, to the stone-coffin as used by Christians. After cremation ceased, on the introduction of Christianity suppose [b], the believing Romans would generally betake themselves to the use of sarcophagi, and of various kinds, stone, marble, lead, &c. The Romanized and Converted Britons would naturally do the same, and place the bodies East and West. As for the Saxons, they, as successors of the Britons, would incline from the first to adopt their practices, and then after that important event, the arrival of Augustine the monk A. D. 596, and the conversion of the nation thereupon, coffins would universally take place, as likewise the mode of placing the body with the feet to the East. Thus very soon after this, we find St. Awdrey of Ely, laid in a marble coffin; for Sexburga, abbess of Ely, intending to remove the body of her sister Aedilreda, or Awdrey, into the church, directed some of the brethren to seek for a stone "*de quo locellum in hoc facere possent.*" They, finding no stone proper for the purpose in the isle, came to Grantacaester, "et mox invenerunt juxta muros civitatis *locellum de marmore albo pulcherrime factum*, operculo quoque similis lapidis aptissime *tectum* [i]." The Saxons, you observe, were now greatly improved in stone-cutting, and as this receptacle was found ready prepared [k], one is obliged to conclude, that the custom of making stone-coffins had prevailed there some time before. This is the oldest instance I have met with amongst the Saxons [l]; however, from this time downward, stone-coffins

[b] Ainsworth, Monum. Kemp. p. 175. Thoresby, Mus. p. 560. Kirckman, p. 15.

[i] Bede, lib. iv. c. 19.

[k] Bede would have it understood as a miracle, but be this as it will, a stone you see was to be sought to make a coffin of.

[l] It was A. 695. Awdrey died 679. and this was 169 years after. Bede, l. c. have

have been discovered all over England, inasmuch that it is needless either to name the several places where they have been found, or refer to the numerous authors who have mentioned them.

IN regard, now, to the second point, "that the corps in your "coffins" lay on the ground without any stones under them, bodies were deposited much in the same manner, so far as I have observed, in the kistvaens above-mentioned; and from this circumstance again, your coffins, Sir, appear to be the production of a rude, barbarous, and very unpolished age. You will please to remember, that whereas in a former paper on the birds bones, I ventured to assert your *Twynham* to have been a place very anciently settled; the present very old sarcophagi found there, which must be of the 4th century at least, amount, in my opinion, to a strong additional proof of it.

I am, Sir,

Most affectionately yours,

SAMUEL PEGGE.

*Whittington, 19 Feb. 1777.*



